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UNITED STATES NAVAL STRATEGY IN THE SOUTH CHINA
SEA TO ENSURE INTERNATIONAL FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION

by

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Biography

CDR Hubert Dantzler is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, AL. He graduated from Auburn University in 1992 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. He enlisted in the Navy in 1994 and attended the Navy and Marine Corps Intelligence Training Center (NMITC). His first assignment was to the Atlantic Intelligence Command (AIC) where he worked with the Marine Corp element supporting expeditionary operations and in 1997 he was accepted into Officer Candidate School (OCS). He then completed Naval Intelligence Officer Basic Course (NIOBC). Additional education included a Master of Science and his Joint Phase Military Education (JPME) Phase I from the Naval Post Graduate School (NPS).

Commander Dantzler's operational assignments include two assignments onboard the USS CARL VINSON, one as the Multi Source Interpretation (MSI) Officer during Operation DESERT FOX and later as the Senior Intelligence Officer (SIO) during Operation INHERENT RESOLVE. During Operation IRAQI FREEDOM he served as the N2 with Destroyer Squadron Twenty-Two (DESRON 22) and he also deployed to Iraq supporting ground operations. He has also deployed to Africa and Afghanistan to support Overseas Contingency Operations.

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Abstract

The United States Navy maintains a near constant presence within the South China Sea with ships either underway or based close by in Singapore, Guam and Japan. The Philippines and Vietnam are the two most active local foils against China's growing influence and aggressive activities in the South China Sea. This research paper uses a qualitative approach to argue that the US Navy strategy, in the South China Sea, must use a combination of confrontational and cooperative measures with the Chinese, while cooperating with the Philippine and Vietnamese governments to ensure continued freedom of safe navigation. To begin a summary of some of the significant events will be investigated to set a baseline of where China, the Philippines, Vietnam and the United States currently see themselves and perceive each other in the challenging South China Sea environment. Next, the national strategies, as formally documented, are discussed for the United States, China, Vietnam and the Philippines. The following section focuses on potential ways ahead for the US Navy in the South China Sea to include confrontation, cooperation, isolation, and building partnerships to resolve maritime and territorial disputes.

Four recommendations emerge from this paper, which attempt to lay out an appropriate US Naval strategy for the South China Sea. The first recommendation is for the United States to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). The second recommendation is for the US Navy to maintain both a confrontational and cooperative strategy in the South China Sea regarding China. The third recommendation is for the US Navy to build a closer relationship with the Vietnamese Navy. The final recommendation is for the US Navy to maintain its relationship with the Philippine Navy.

Introduction

On 27 October 2015 the USS LASSEN (DDG-82) operated "...seven nautical miles from China's manmade island in what it initially announced as a Freedom of Navigation (FON) exercise."¹ The manmade island was "...Subi Reef, an artificial island created by Chinese engineers on a low-tide elevation."² The United States Navy operation was a response to the Chinese government's continued reclamation of numerous previously uninhabitable reefs within the South China Sea. In response to the USS LASSON's FON operations Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Hong Lei stated "China 'resolutely opposes any country, in the name of freedom of navigation and flight, violating international law and undermining China's sovereignty and security interests.'"³ This is only the latest in a back and forth between the US and Chinese government's over the ongoing international disputes within the highly contested waters.

This research paper uses a qualitative approach to argue that the US Navy strategy, in the South China Sea, must use a combination of confrontational and cooperative measures with the Chinese as well as cooperate with the Philippine and Vietnamese governments to ensure continued freedom of safe navigation. Through this policy the US Navy will work towards stabilizing a region on the precipice of regional confrontation. Currently "Beijing is party to six of East Asia's more than two dozen maritime territorial disputes: The Diaoyu/Senkaku Islands with Japan; Taiwan, the Paracel Islands with Vietnam; the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea with Taiwan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei, and Malaysia; water areas of the South China Sea with the foregoing nations and Indonesia, and the maritime border with Vietnam."⁴ The United States Navy maintains a near constant presence within the South China Sea with ships either underway or based close by in Singapore, Guam and Japan.

The Philippines and Vietnam are the two most active local foils against China's growing influence and aggressive activities in the South China Sea. This is not to minimize or discount Japan's claim in the Senkaku/Diaoyu Island or the other nation's claims within the South China Sea. However, the potential for the US Navy to engage with Vietnam and the Philippines in order to impact China's desire "...to guarantee [their] access to a wealth of natural resources in the region"⁵ could ultimately provide a solution beneficial to all regional parties. In the Pacific it is the goal of the United States sea services to expand "... naval presence in the Indo-Asia-Pacific [to] enhance...warfighting advantages in-theater,...providing a foundation for strengthening alliances through improved interoperability, more integrated operations, and increasingly complex exercises and training...to build and sustain regional capacities to deal with local maritime security challenges."⁶ Focusing on engaging the Philippines, Vietnam and China the US Navy will best accomplish the goal of minimizing security challenges while ensuring worldwide access to naval sea lanes.

History of the South China Sea

"The South China Sea functions as the *throat* of the Western Pacific and Indian oceans-the mass of connective economic tissue where global sea routes coalesce."⁷ The purpose of the US Navy is to provide a "...secure environment necessary for an open economic system based on the free flow of goods"⁸ worldwide. In order to provide security in the South China Sea, it is imperative to understand history to inform future interactions. The following is a summary of some of the significant events which set a baseline of where China, the Philippines, Vietnam and the United States presently stand and how each country views one another in the challenging South China Sea environment.

China

Historically, China's "...naval missions were for coastal defense, control of maritime trade, defending the regime against domestic threats, and ensuring economic benefit to the state."⁹ Additionally, the current Chinese government uses the fifteenth century voyages of the Ming dynasty eunuch admiral Zheng He to expose their long history of a "Sinocentric system of diplomacy and commerce that has characterized Asian politics for millennia."¹⁰ These two ideas underlie the Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) as well as the entire government's modus operandi in the South China Sea.

"The contemporary basis for China's territorial claims is a statement that Chinese premier Zhou Enlai issued in August 1951 during the Allied peace treaty negotiations with Japan."¹¹ The Paracel and Spratly Islands were occupied by the Japanese during World War II and were surrendered to the Chinese government in 1945, however, "...the 1951 US-Japanese did not specify to whom Japan was formally ceding the islands."¹² Even prior to World War II Chinese maps included the nine-dash-line, which encompasses much of the South China Sea.¹³ The Chinese government continues to lay claim to the majority of the South China Sea and worked through both coercive and cooperative methods to extend their influence over the area.

Over the past year "China has built three airstrips on its outposts in the Spratlys, installed radar and communication gear, and dredged deep ports that could accommodate large warships."¹⁴ Additionally, the most recent Chinese military strategy continues to maintain the importance of the Sea Lanes of Communication and the role the PLAN plays in maintaining security. "The PLAN will continue to organize and perform regular combat readiness patrols and maintain a military presence in relevant sea areas."¹⁵ This maritime philosophy is a

continuation of years of blatant rejection of international law which the country's leadership endorsed.

In 1996 Beijing signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).¹⁶ Upon ratification the Chinese government did attach reservations which complicate international resolutions.¹⁷ These reservations have emboldened the current government in China to adhere to UNCLOS principles it deems valid and demands all complaints be resolved bilaterally.¹⁸ It must be recognized the United States government has not ratified UNCLOS but the US Navy chooses to abide by the treaty's mandates. Although the United States government adheres to international rules of maritime law, domestic politics hinders UNCLOS ratification. When the Chinese government refuses to use established international mechanisms to resolve transnational disputes the Chinese government is relying on its overwhelming size and strength to force smaller regional nations to bend to its will. China's coercive tendencies are further illustrated with their interactions with the Vietnamese government.

Vietnam

The history between Vietnam and China, in the South China Sea, is by far the most confrontational but it is also marked by periods of cooperation. "In 1974, Chinese forces drove the South Vietnamese from the Paracel Islands north of the Spratlys."¹⁹ Then in 1988 "PLAN forces defeated a Vietnamese naval group near the Spratly Islands...sinking three ships and killing seventy-two Vietnamese."²⁰ After these violent naval interactions the two nations began to attempt a more cooperative approach. In 2004 China and Vietnam agreed on "...their maritime boundary in the northern Beibu Gulf (Tonkin Gulf) between Vietnam and Hainan Island."²¹ Additionally, the two nations have worked to resolve fisheries and energy concerns

but only with limited success. In 2005 Chinese law enforcement killed eight Vietnamese fishermen²² indicating that even though China and Vietnam desire peaceful resolution to their regional claims both nations remain willing to violently confront each other. However, the two nations also continue to attempt to work together in order to minimize confrontation in the Gulf of Tonkin. In 2008 the Vietnamese Secretary General Nong Duc Manh and Chinese President Hu Jintao issues a joint statement to continue cooperation to conduct joint fisheries inspection and work together to resolve oil and gas exploration.²³ Despite this joint statement in 2014 the two nations clashed over an oil rig's placement within the South China Sea revealing Vietnam is not going to fully capitulate to Chinese regional maritime demands.

In response to the Chinese Naval build up in the South China Sea the Vietnamese government recently purchased "...six state-of-the-art Kilo-class submarines from Russia."²⁴ Additionally, the refurbishment of Cam Ranh Bay is not only for the newly acquired Kilo submarines but to be made available to other nations' Navies including the United States.²⁵ The Vietnamese government's ability to both engage and confront China is an indication they are a nation the US Navy should view as a potential ally in striving for the common strategic end of ensuring global access to the South China Sea. Additionally, in recent years the United States has initiated ties with the Vietnamese government. Diplomatic relations have been established and trade has blossomed between the two nations. The United States Navy should build on these initial relationships building capacity and engage the Vietnamese Navy in activities such as trust and capabilities related exercises. Unlike Vietnam, the Philippines has a much less violent relationship with China as well as a closer relationship with the United States.

Philippines

Interactions between the Philippines and Chinese Navy's may be less bloody than Vietnamese confrontations but no less problematic for the stability of the region. "The Philippines lacks an effective navy or air force and can not stop China's actions"²⁶ specifically in the Scarborough Shoals and Mischief Reef. China has built Mischief Reef, located within the Philippines Economic Exclusion Zone (EEZ), "into a sizable artificial island"²⁷ with building communications equipment and a helicopter landing pad. "Between April and June 2012, China and the Philippines were engaged in a tense and consequential standoff around Scarborough Shoal."²⁸ This specific incident did not result in any blood shed but did re-emphasize the Philippines lack of any viable hard power and as a result the Chinese government has been able to operate at will within the Scarborough Shoals area.

"[T]he Philippines has remained among the most corrupt, dysfunctional, intractable, and poverty-stricken societies in maritime Asia."²⁹ Such dysfunction has led to an inability to control the areas of the South China Sea it claims and has looked to outside forces to help enforce their position, specifically the United Nations and the United States. "In January 2013, the Philippines directly confronted Chinese coercive diplomacy by filing a statement of claim against China in the Arbitral Tribunal of UNCLOS."³⁰ "As expected, China opposed the filing and refused to participate in international mediation."³¹

It could be said the Philippines relationship with the United States has been turbulent. However, currently it appears the relationship is moving towards a more cooperative interaction. In 1999 Manila ratified the Visiting Forces Agreement with the United States, "which facilitated renewal of exercises between the two nations."³² Additionally, during President Obama's most recent trip to Asia he announced the United States will provide "...more than \$250 million in

maritime aid to its Southeast Asian allies -- including a warship for the Philippines.”³³ This closer relationship could benefit not only the United States and the Philippines but may help stabilize the region.

United States

The United States has been closely involved in the South China Sea since its invasion of the Philippines on 1 May 1898. The United States interest has ebbed and flowed over the years but recent concern has increased with the growth in capabilities and actions of the Chinese military. Recently naval interaction has increased between China and the United States in the South China Sea. Specifically, “...in March 2001, September 2002, March 2009, and May 2009, Chinese ships and aircraft confronted and harassed the U.S. naval ships Bowditch, Impeccable, Victorious as they were conducting survey and ocean surveillance operations in China’s EEZ”³⁴ as well as “an incident on December 5, 2013, in which a Chinese navy ship put itself in the path of the U.S. Navy cruiser Cowpens as it was operating 30 or more miles from China’s aircraft carrier Liaoning, forcing the Cowpens to change course to avoid a collision.”³⁵ These incidents appear to indicate a willingness of the Chinese Navy to confront US Navy units operating in Chinese claimed waters. On the other hand, the United States has not ratified UNCLOS and China could perceive the US Naval activity as confrontational. However, the US Navy continues to operate in the South China Sea in adherence with its philosophy of maneuvering freely about the world’s sea lanes in accordance with international norms. This belief the US Navy is the guardian of the global commons is reiterated in the United States governments’ strategic documents.

United States South China Sea Strategy

Throughout the history of the United States its Navy has been used to ensure the freedom to navigate worldwide safely. Additionally, it is the inherent belief every nation on the globe has the right to access the global commons without fear or harassment from other parties. This position sets the stage for how the United States expresses its strategy regarding the South China Sea.

National Security Strategy

President Obama is direct in his forward of the 2015 National Security Strategy regarding China. “The scope of our cooperation with China is unprecedented, even as we remain alert to China’s military modernization and reject any role for intimidation in resolving territorial disputes.”³⁶ Specifically, the National Security Strategy addresses assured access to oceans stating the United States “...will continue to promote rules for responsible behavior while making sure we have the capability to assure access.”³⁷ Regarding the rebalance to the Pacific the National Security Strategy states “American leadership will remain essential to shaping the region’s long-term trajectory to enhance stability and security, facilitate trade and commerce through an open and transparent system, and ensure respect for universal rights and freedoms.”³⁸ In short, the United States will continue to work to enhance current relationships, build new relationships and enforce international law while operating freely in the South China Sea.

National Military Strategy

The 2015 National Military Strategy acknowledges the strategic framework laid out in the National Security Strategy and provides specific guidance for the Department of Defense. According to the strategy the military “...will press forward with the rebalance to the Asia-Pacific region, placing our most advanced capabilities and greater capacity in that vital theater.

We will strengthen our alliances with Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand. We also will deepen our security relationship with India and build upon our partnerships with New Zealand, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Bangladesh.”³⁹ Regarding China, the strategy states “...China’s actions are adding tension to the Asia-Pacific region. For example, its claims to nearly the entire South China Sea are inconsistent with international law... Accordingly, we continue to invest in a substantial military-to-military relationship with China...while urging [them] to settle their disputes peacefully and in accordance with international law.”⁴⁰ This strategy of engaging all of the regional players while insisting every nation adheres to international norms is the cornerstone of the US military’s operations in the South China Sea.

National Seapower Strategy

A Cooperative Strategy for 21st Century Seapower is a US Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard document delineating the way forward for US naval strategy. According to the document “...[F]orward naval presence is essential to strengthening alliances and partnerships, providing the secure environment necessary for an open economic system based on the free flow of goods, protecting U.S. natural resources, promoting stability, deterring conflict, and responding to aggression.”⁴¹ Specifically regarding the rebalance to the Pacific “...the United States seeks to strengthen cooperation with long-standing allies...and continues to cultivate partnerships with states.”⁴² Regarding Chinese activity in the South China Sea, the strategy states “China’s naval expansion...presents challenges when it employs force or intimidation against other sovereign nations to assert territorial claims.”⁴³ In essence, this naval strategy further refines what direction the US Navy will follow concerning its interactions not only with the Chinese but also

with other regional nations. However, how do the strategies of China, Vietnam and the Philippines conflict or enhance the US national strategy?

Regional Countries South China Sea Strategy

There are two aspects which provide insight to a nation's strategy. One is the actions a nation takes and the other is the formal documentation a nation publishes regarding its national strategy. Earlier a brief history provided some of the specific actions China, Vietnam and the Philippines have taken that can illuminate each nation's strategic vision. Now it is necessary to understand what each country's formal strategy contains.

China

In China's 26 May 2015 Military Strategy white paper the Chinese government states "...territorial sovereignty and maritime rights and interests"⁴⁴ are a national security concern. Additionally, the Chinese white paper contends "...some of its offshore neighbors take provocative actions and reinforce their military presence on China's reefs and islands"⁴⁵ illegally. Finally, China views "[s]ome external countries are also busy meddling in South China Sea affairs; a tiny few maintain constant close-in air and sea surveillance and reconnaissance against China."⁴⁶ These statements are informative because it lays bare China's position regarding the South China Sea as their territorial sea and recognized (but does not specify) the ongoing activities the US Navy conducts. The fact the US military regularly operates within the South China Sea is a basic tenant of the US military strategy to maintain open and free SLOCs whereas the Chinese strategy is focused to "effectively safeguard the sovereignty and security of China's territorial land, air and sea."⁴⁷ These opposing strategies will continue to increase tensions without some level of cooperation.

On a positive note “[t]he PLAN will enhance its capabilities for strategic deterrence and counterattack, maritime maneuvers, joint operations at sea, comprehensive defense and comprehensive support.”⁴⁸ While this statement does allude to nuclear deterrence and improving capabilities it could also leave a possibility for cooperation between regional and US Navy’s to conduct joint exercises. During the past two Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercises the PLAN has participated in the international joint war game designed to build international relations and cooperation. Additionally, both nations’ naval leadership have visited each other on multiple occasions to enhance better collaboration and coordination between the two navies.

Vietnam

According to the Vietnam’s strategic guidance “[t]he Vietnam People’s Navy is the core service in protecting Vietnam’s maritime sovereignty. The Navy’s responsibility is to strictly manage and control the waters and islands in the East Sea under Vietnam’s sovereignty, to maintain security, to counter any acts of violating sovereignty, sovereign rights, jurisdiction and national interests of Vietnam at sea...in conformity with Vietnamese and international laws,...and...participate in... joint and combined operations...at sea.”⁴⁹ This strategy adheres to the historical propensity of the Vietnamese people to aggressively defend territory which they deem their own while following recognized international norms. This is further expressed in the nation’s strategy verbiage regarding regional institutions.

The Vietnamese strategy extensively talks about the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) where China only mentions the organization twice in its strategy. According to the Vietnamese strategy “[r]egarding sovereignty disputes in the East Sea, ASEAN countries have further committed to complying with and implementing ‘The Declaration of Conducts of All Parties in the East Sea’ (DOC) and striving to build the ‘Code of Conducts of All Parties in

the East Sea' (COC) in order to reach a long-term solution to this complex issue on the basis of the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea.”⁵⁰ It appears Vietnam is open to multi-lateral cooperation but remains committed to its territorial claims. Specifically, “Vietnam’s Navy has set up hotlines and conducted joint patrols with the naval forces of Cambodia, Malaysia, Thailand and China in order to improve the effectiveness of coordination in maintaining security in overlapping zones and bordering areas at sea.”⁵¹ This strategy recognizes the importance of cooperation while not abandoning its perceived territorial entitlements.

Philippines

The Philippines national strategy adheres to the belief the nation must protect its territorial integrity to include “...the preservation of [their] Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and its protection from illegal incursions and resource exploitation.”⁵² This is a strategy which recognizes the limitations and the depressed nature of the Philippine government and economy. In order to increase its capacity the Philippines strategy discusses ASEAN multiple times mimicking Vietnam’s strategic document. According to the Philippines strategy “[t]here are existing border disputes among the member states, but the ASEAN consistently upholds the negotiating principles of consultation and consensus as standard operating procedures.”⁵³ This philosophy of regional cooperation is in stark contrast to the Chinese strategy to only participating in bilateral negotiations and refuse regional cooperation. Finally, the Philippines strategy states “...a continuing US security presence in the Asia Pacific is considered as a positive stabilizing force, particularly with the growing complexity of security challenges that confront the region.”⁵⁴ Therefore, the Philippines strategy is the only one to formally recognize the United States as an important component in regional relations while reiterating its own territorial claims and the need for multi-lateral discussions to resolve ongoing disputes.

How Should the US Navy Engage the PLAN in the South China Sea?

There are many different paths the US Navy can take to ensure the security of US national interest. This section investigates independently some of the strategies the US Navy could pursue in the South China Sea to ensure freedom of navigation.

Confrontation

It could be argued the US Navy is currently conducting, in the South China Sea, a confrontational strategy against China. It appears this is how the Chinese government views US Naval actions. China's Vice Foreign Minister Liu Zhenmin responding to the recent FON operation of the USS LASSEN said "[t]his time, in a very high profile manner, the U.S. sent military vessels within 12 nautical miles of China's islands and reefs. This has gone beyond the scope of freedom of navigation. It is a political provocation and the purpose is to test China's response."⁵⁵ On the other hand, this confrontational position can benefit not only the US Navy but the strategic interests of the United States. A near constant presence in the South China Sea in the interests of freedom of navigation provides "...a legal cover for defending its maritime position and influence in Asia. At minimum, the US seeks to preserve its ability to continue surveillance activities."⁵⁶ However, using confrontation to challenge the legality of the Chinese maritime and territorial claims could be a fragile arrangement considering the US government has not ratified UNCLOS.⁵⁷ Additionally, the more confrontational the US Navy becomes in the South China Sea the greater the risk of active hostile military action.

Cooperation with China

Shortly after the USS LASSEN conducted its FON operation, in the South China Sea, the USS STETHEM made a port call in Shanghai, China and conducted a bi-lateral exercise with the PLAN. The exercise was "...a simulated rescue of a swimmer in the water and the navies [used]

the protocols agreed under the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea, known as CUES.”⁵⁸ This is one of many exercises the Chinese and US Navy’s have participated in over the years. When military organizations work and exercise together, the mystery of each other’s operations as well as tactics, techniques and procedures can be reduced. With this cooperation tensions can be diminished and a stronger relationship can be built.

Isolation

Another way to couch this argument is for the US Navy to dis-engage from the region. Robert Kaplan draws a corollary between the action the United States took with the Monroe Doctrine and China’s current strategic position regarding the South China Sea. Basically, any disagreements regarding the South China Sea are regional matters and the US Navy should not interfere much like the United States told Europe to stay out of any matters regarding the Caribbean.⁵⁹ However, the world is a much different place then it was during the Monroe Doctrine and with globalization instability in the South China Sea could impact the economy around the world. It may be in the national interests of the US Navy to not take a front seat to naval activity, in the South China Sea, but should participate and enhance other nation’s activities to balance the power gap between China and lesser enabled countries.

Cooperation with Regional Countries

Enabling and cooperating with the Philippines and Vietnam could be the most beneficial or the most costly strategy for the US Navy to pursue. As argued by Michael Pillsbury “China wants to guarantee access to a wealth of natural resources in the region and is hoping to intimidate its neighbors so they are too scared of China to unite and oppose its ambitions.”⁶⁰ If Mr. Pillsbury statement is accurate the US Navy can blunt China’s aggression by helping other nations in the region work together through ASEAN to build a viable coalition against Chinese

provocative actions in the South China Sea. However, it must be remembered that China is not the only nation in the region with competing claims and any actions the US Navy takes must maintain a neutral demeanor and focus on peaceful resolution to any and all claims using international norms and laws. While maintaining an unbiased position there are potential actions the US government may take in order to peacefully resolve the South China Sea territorial concerns. These actions include ratifying UNCLOS, building relations with China and Vietnam, maintain the current relationship with the Philippines and continue to confront China's regional aggression.

Recommendations

1. The United States should ratify UNCLOS. Currently the US Navy abides by the Law of the Sea but the US Senate has yet to ratify the treaty. As with many treaties, UNCLOS is an international regulation which within the United States is believed to be restrictive to the freedoms the American people hold dear. However, without ratification the potential exists for other nations to question the United States' motives in the South China Sea, and around the world. If UNCLOS is ratified then the US Navy and the United States will be able to firmly stand behind the tenants of UNCLOS and better demand other signatories adhere to its mandates. This may remain an unachievable goal as long a divisive politics and domestic affairs remain at the forefront of American policymaking and no maritime security dilemma arises which UNCLOS can clearly alleviate.
2. The US Navy should maintain both a confrontational and cooperative strategy in the South China Sea toward China. This stick and carrot approach will telegraph to the Chinese government that the US Navy is prepared to participate in bi-lateral operations but will not tolerate aggressive actions or territorial claims outside of international laws and regulations.

However, these opposing activities could lead to misunderstanding and escalation. This avenue should be carefully tread recognizing the vastly different strategic visions of the United States and China.

3. The US Navy should build a closer relationship with the Vietnamese Navy. Within the South China Sea there is arguable no stronger nation willing to confront the Chinese than Vietnam. The government of Vietnam has indicated its willingness to enhance relations with the United States. The US Navy should work with the Vietnamese Navy to include joint exercises and joint patrols. Additionally, the US Navy should conduct port calls in the country as often as possible. Building this relationship will not only strengthen the Vietnamese Navy but will let the Chinese know the US Navy is strengthening its alliances in the South China Sea. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to this recommendation is convincing the American people and the US government that the Vietnamese are right for an American alliance. The wounds of the Vietnam War run deep in America and providing assistance and cooperation may be a bridge to far.

4. The US Navy should maintain its relationship with the Philippine Navy. Currently, the relationship with the Filipino government is strong and stable. However, the government of the Philippines remains corrupt and weak. It may be possible for the Philippine government to improve with time and effort but the Filipino people need to be fully engaged in its own modernization. The US Navy needs to continue its close relationship with the Navy of the Philippines but must continue to be vigilant of the inherent weakness within the country. The United States needs to ensure any assistance provided to the Philippine government is closely monitored to ensure its proper execution. If the assistance provided is deemed wasted it is conceivable the American people will demand decreased future cooperation.

Conclusion

“Eight of the world’s 10 busiest container ports are in the Asia-Pacific region, and almost 30 percent of the world’s maritime trade transits the South China Sea annually, including approximately \$1.2 trillion in ship-borne trade bound for the United States. Approximately two-thirds of the world’s oil shipments transit through the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, and in 2014, more than 15 million barrels of oil passed through the Malacca Strait per day.”⁶¹ Any region of the world responsible for such a portion of transit, commerce and energy will only increase in worldwide strategic importance. Therefore, it is likely the South China Sea will remain an area where tensions continue.

In accordance with current US national strategy the US Navy will “...maintain the capability to ensure the free flow of commerce, to respond quickly to those in need, and to deter those who might contemplate aggression.”⁶² This means the US Navy must remain engaged in the South China Sea through a strategy of both confronting and cooperating with the PLAN while maintaining its close relationship with the Philippine Navy and enhancing the relationship with the Vietnamese Navy. Through these measures the US Navy will be able to assist in stabilizing the region and work with all of the concerned parties to resolve any and all territorial and maritime disputes. However, the United States needs to recognize each nation with claims in the South China Sea have their own national strategy which will differ and perhaps conflict with US national strategy. It is imperative the US use its instruments of power to enhance regional relationships and not sow the seeds of contempt and aggression towards American strategic ends.

Notes

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